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## **THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE VALIDATION OF ACQUIRED EXPERIENCE (VAE) IN FRANCE WOULD BE A CULTURAL REVOLUTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION TRAINING?**

### **Abstract**

This contribution shows the conditions of a change of prospect in higher education which is based on institutional and policy positioning in favor of the implementation of the devices of Validation of Acquired Experience (VAE) which is used to deliver a whole or components of a qualification (certification) on the basis of the knowledge and skills of the applicant acquired through experience, and on the initiatives of the individuals in education and the formation throughout their life. These devices appear in the political discourses like a new appropriateness of access to certification and recognition of a right qualification taking into consideration competence acquired during “the courses of experience”. Nevertheless, the intention of social justice and equity, is it compatible with a reduction of the costs related with the courses of continuing education by the process? If the public policies do not contribute as much to the resolution of uncertainties economic and social perceived by the questioned actors that the political discourses it suggest, it is because the device reveals new sources of socio-cognitive conflicts and a modification of the representation of the professional paths of the candidates. However, a cultural revolution in higher education training could precede with acceptance by the educative community of higher education (the teaching researchers) while considering the “conscientisation” necessary, it means of transmitting a know-how, an attitude and a knowledge – all these being the foundations of the candidates’ skills – the difference between what the candidates believe they know and what they actually know, finally to question the candidates about the antinomy between legitimate and illegitimate knowledge, all these have to be present in the candidates’ reflection, without their being necessarily aware of them.

### **Introduction**

Since the second half of the 20th century, all the functions within higher education training have been solicited by a general layout placing economy as its foremost organizer. Consequently, the model of higher education training under study here is based on an innovating educational scheme allowing the combination of two other means of access to qualification: continuing training and the VAE, both constitutive of the offer of renewed modular training. This new model is situated at the frontier between action and knowledge, between past and present, and it stirs up new interrogations as to knowledge acquiring and practising, as well within institutional academic contexts as without (Neyrat, 2007). In that sense, we are led to make the assumption that, if the actors of the VAE, whether they are teaching researchers or candidates to the VAE, seem to resist, for some of them, or to renounce, for others, it is because they feel confronted with overwhelming

difficulties, based on their relationship to knowledge inherited from their partly personal, partly collective history.

Our analysis is based on the methodological procedure of the participating observation of four experimental groups (25 students) at Master's Degree level, and four teaching researchers working inside this scheme. The analysis focuses on the study of representations, on an educational engineering work, on postural changes between the assessed and the assessors, on the candidates' validation files, knowing that these candidates can be granted extra training modules in order to earn the targeted qualification.

### **Higher education process and lifelong education**

Building up a lifelong educational and training continuum is a widely shared prospect, even if the changes it calls for mean an evolution in higher education training that raises both interest and concern. How can the borderlines between initial training and continuing training be progressively erased? How is it possible to go from logic of a piling-up of levels, of a juxtaposition of numerous courses, to one of continuous curricula that encourage ascending personal and professional careers, with a real visibility for the people concerned? However, by laying too exclusive a stress on individual responsibilities at the expense of the part and functions traditionally attributed to institutions, public authorities and corporations, a liberal conception could impose an understanding of lifelong education as associated to concerns for the risks run by the finality of social cohesion (equal opportunities and access to training, the fight against inequalities) – which is at the heart of the European social model, in conformity with the Lisbon strategy and the European social agenda.

#### *Principles that now weigh on higher education training*

The very fact that a diversity of formal, non formal and informal lifelong educational and training paths are said to exist and the way to acknowledge and confer them the same social value are considered by the teaching community as a major advance. Recognizing and validating each of them must be implemented in order to encourage overpasses to an access to employment and to degrees and qualifications. These measures are more liable to be an answer to the recurrent issue of the fight against inequalities, thus referring to the principle of an equal access to lifelong education and training (Lafont, 2011).

The implementation of the VAE linked to continuing training should produce a positive effect on a greater incentive to train oneself. All the potentially interested individuals should, from now on, be offered this opportunity – more specifically those whose skills are not attested by a corresponding qualification – whatever their age, sex, career, place of residence or the time when the issue of this recognition arises. For training and certification organisms – among these, universities – the issues and challenges, as far as recognition and VAE are concerned, extend to the « *six million working people – among whom many potential beneficiaries with low-standard degrees, more specifically, those who have, or have had, receding jobs (reconversion) – who have known but precarious careers on the work market (young unqualified temporary workers) or who target 'regulated' professions* » (Besson, 2008).

Orientation should give access to careers for the benefit of the students, as well as of the universities and their partners.

### *The ambiguity of certain orientation*

While higher education knowledge and scientific culture are essential mainstays of life in society, the objective of a raise in the training standards – more particularly, academic standards – cannot be reduced to a global increase in the efficiency of the production system (De Montlibert, 2004). This issue has been forcefully broached by higher education professors who campaign in popular education movements, for example, along with most trade-unions, as much as higher education staff members and salaried employees.

However, thanks to the VAE and to the innovating scheme associated to it, there is here the beginning of a major answer, even if there is no guarantee that the degrees awarded in initial and continuing training and by the recognition of experience have a real impact on the material and professional conditions of the people concerned, nor that their wish to get trained always ensures them financial results. Some of those who advocate this scheme consider that it would help the candidates to *« gain time and spend ten times less than a classical training »* (Vilchien, Audige, Debeaupuis, Segal, 2005).

### **Linking the Validation of Acquired Experience and continuing training**

The VAE is one of the fundamental elements of the 2002 law on social modernization<sup>1</sup>. It is a right providing the opportunity to convert personal experience, whether it is professional or social, into a degree, a title or a professional certificate. Indeed, these measures *« make it possible for anybody who has been active for at least three years to validate their experience with a view to getting a degree or a title with a professional finality »*<sup>2</sup>. These measure change the traditional pattern in which certification was the ultimate award of a higher education or professional training. From now on, learning through professional and social experience, in the widest sense, makes it possible to acquire the knowledge, a know-how, and a way of existing and certain habits (Dubar, 2001). It can perhaps also be considered as an equivalent for training, thanks to the awarding of the same attested and recognized certification.

In the scheme under study, when candidates, student-trainees, fail to get their complete degree within the framework of the VAE, they are prescribed extra training modules, within the framework of continuing training, so as to obtain the complete degree. This scheme calls for changes coming from the innovation it causes, thus accounting for the numerous initiatives that have been taken to meet the emerging social demands that the candidates crystallize. In fact, social innovation produces the interactions and inter-organizational relation-ships through which new institutional norms can emerge. And the achievement of the innovation process would mean the upsetting of social norms and the creation of a new normative framework (Alter, 2002). Consequently, a change in higher education ethos is taking place.

<sup>1</sup> Official Journal dated 28.04.2002, decree nr. 2002-615 (26.04.2002) taken for the enforcement of article 900-1 of the work chart and articles L.335-6 of the education chart.

<sup>2</sup> Art. L.900, paragraph 4 of the work code.

### *The teaching researchers*

Recognizing knowledge acquired through experience implies a deep change in the shared representation of knowledge that higher education members have built all along their own careers, in reference to knowledge elaborated through studying and teaching. But isn't the issue then an opening up of the teaching researchers' functions, of an extension of the missions attributed to universities, making them accept a notion of training that forces them to widen their skills as regards the teaching and monitoring of practitioners? In view of the profiles of the teaching researchers in charge of the development of the scheme, among « *the indifferent, the proselytes and the activists* » (Cherqui-Houot, 2001), an isomorphism between the characteristics of the careers and professional histories of the teaching staff invested in continuing teaching, and the characteristics of those interested in the VAE, seems to take shape for those who have a particularly well-developed knowledge and experience of candidates concerned by the VAE. However, practising the VAE calls for an « *educational adjustment* », opposed to the traditional forms of the « *knowledge-power* » equation, where the relationship between teachers and learners is known to be strongly inegalitarian (Benhamou, 2005). This makes it necessary to pay renewed attention to the modes of assessment.

However, the possibility to deliver a complete higher education degree seems liable to modify the « *principles of degree awarding and the social part played by these degrees. In the same way as the notion of skills* » (Tanguy, Ropé, 1994), the extensive use of this notion tends to « *modify the cognitive and cultural models that prevail in the higher education sphere* » (Ropé, 2005). Mobilizing individual and collective knowledge and experiences can allow VAE candidates to share and acquire the problems encountered all along their exchanges, in order to overtake them, and finally produce a new shared knowledge, the basis of their validation project. In that sense, the VAE contributes to a new reflexion on learning in order to create a moment of cooperative production and exchanges during which the candidate is at the centre of the learning process. Thus, all along the VAE process, the examiners are to make assessments « *no longer according to their own teaching, but to the evaluation of action-produced knowledge, outside their own sphere of influence. This new posture changes the very representation of the degree in question as the achievement of an intellectual career, and thus as what can also be considered as the outcome of an active career* » (Lenoir, 2002, pp. 91-108). Therefore, can this significantly undermine the power that the teaching researcher, partly consciously, exerts? Could it be one of the unspoken reasons of the resistance and misunderstandings at the origin of tensions and conflicts within the University, where implementing these VAE measures is accompanied by « *an attempt to recompose hierarchies and new forms of domination* » (Ropé, 2005)?

### *The VAE candidates*

In the case of the higher education training model, in which a large part of the assessment system is based on the cognitive skills of analysis, synthesis and writing, the validation project – the corner-stone of the VAE scheme through which the candidates describe their professional and social experience – is meant to prove skills supposed to be up to those attested by the targeted diploma.

The analysis of practitioners' remarks as to the measures concerning the Recognition and VAE makes the process appear too cumbersome (Mlekus, 1998); it demands true cultural prerequisites and makes those candidates who are least familiar with written procedures tributary of its complexity. The misleading aspect of a certain autonomy given at University by the validation project implies a more personal investment as to its written form and calls for capacities of document structuring that not all the candidates possess.

Their perspectives all carry social and economical issues. They express their motivations in terms of a vocational re-orientation, of a new job, of an easier access to employment, of earning a degree, of reaching a high training standard, of widening their field of knowledge, without admitting that there is a correlation between the factors of success of the process and the motivational elements that underlie their company. Thus, the acceptance of the constraints and suffering with which the candidates are confronted is proportional to the issues they have identified. Therefore, they, partially consciously, define a limit of profitability beyond which – if the material or symbolical benefit they can get does not correspond to their expectancies – they momentarily or permanently abandon the process. Among these constraints, those linked to the language rules and the interiorization of those of writing set the candidates back to the conditions in which they have acquired them and to those of the use they know now.

This infers observing the training and qualification standards of the population under study, and consequently, noting that the social and economical conditions of acquiring and using language skills are in direct relationship with their school days and that the standard of language incompetence is correlated to an incomplete learning subsequent to unachieved careers.

## Conclusion

This study on the motivations and measures at the origin of the implementation of the VAE process questions the ethos of higher education teaching researchers, as well as the freedom of movement the VAE candidates have in order to become the actors of their future, although they are not totally aware of all the constraints they are confronted with all along the process. It is thus possible to see to what extent the VAE process is a higher education training model within the framework of lifelong training. However, it is now a fact that the awareness of the difficulties the teaching researchers meet, on the one hand, provokes reactions liable to create new sources of conflict ; on the other hand, whenever these difficulties emerge for the candidates, they tend to cause either inhibition or a partial or even total dropping out of the project. This accounts for the fact that there is a gap between the number of potentially interested candidates and the number of those who finally get involved in this recognition project. Only an « élite » or too few of them still seem capable of taking possession of the opportunities universally offered to access to it, as is confirmed by the first studies. Therefore, cannot it be inferred that the law favours those who have best integrated the norms and expectancies of the system, in order to convert their investment into a material and symbolical profit? The law of social modernization and the articles concerning the VAE have found a legitimacy in view of social expectancies. True, some of these are founded on painful experiences. But the Cultural Revolution in higher education training seems to lie in the law's

predisposition to make individuals the actors of a promising project, that they can dissociate from their present day situation, provided they are capable of a reflexive process, though this is not explicitly expressed to them.

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